

WESTCHESTER PUBLIC LIBRARY

A BRIEF HISTORY

Prior to the creation of the Westchester Public Library, library service in Westchester Township was provided by two independent libraries. The Town of Porter had its own town library serving its residents. The remainder of the township received library service from the Gary Public Library through a contractual agreement made by the township with the GPL.

Numerous members of the community evaluated their library service and decided that although it had been valuable throughout the years, the service and facilities were insufficient to provide for the current and future needs of the community. The proposed solution to the problem was to merge library service throughout the township and to create a single town-township public library with the means to improve service and facilities.

In 1972, the Westchester Public Library was created under the Public Library Law of 1947 which permitted the township to merge with the Town of Porter, establishing a new municipal corporation serving all township residents.

In 1973, the library began construction of new facilities, the Thomas Library in Chesterton and the Hageman Library in Porter, which were completed and opened to the public in 1975.

Throughout the 1980's the library operated under rather restrictive property tax controls until the Indiana Library Association succeeded in getting the approval of the Indiana General Assembly for a public library tax appeal process. The tax appeal process provided some relief from property tax controls for library's that could demonstrate a justifiable need for more revenue to the State Board of Tax Commissioners. The library slowly began a period of growth and the expansion of programs and services. The property tax appeal process for libraries was later repealed.

In 1992, the library installed its first integrated online library automated system replacing the card catalogs with online public access computer terminals and automating the circulation process.

In 1995, the library acquired the Library Service Center and adjacent parking lot. The Library Service Center was remodeled to house a large meeting room, the library's Technical Services Department, and the Chesterton Adult Learning Center. Soon after acquiring the LSC, the library used the facility to create and operate the Westchester Township Historical Museum.

In 1997 the library began a project to offer public access to the Internet and to make the library's online public access computer available to the Internet public.

In 1999, the library acquired the lot previously occupied by the old St. Patrick's Church for the future construction of a parking lot.

In 2000, the library converted its automated system from text-based Galaxy to Polaris, a Microsoft Windows-based automated system.

In 2001, the library's largest taxpayer, Bethlehem Steel filed for bankruptcy, drastically reducing the library's property tax revenue for a number of years. The library responded by reducing staff, operating hours, material purchasing, and public service programs. A large number of community volunteers were recruited and assisted the remaining library staff in providing basic library services.

In 2003, the library began to slowly restore some of the lost library service and programs while working to bolster the library's financial condition.

In 2005, the library negotiated with the Duneland School Corporation to arrange for the lease of the Brown Mansion on Porter Avenue to house an expanded Westchester Township History Museum.

Recently the General Assembly of the State of Indiana approved a number of new measures designed to again rigidly control the amount of property taxes local units of government are able to raise to support their services. Fortunately, the steps the library took in 2001 and 2002 have proven to stabilize the library's financial condition.

Throughout the years the library has enjoyed tremendous support from the community and wishes to thank all of the patrons and taxpayers who have helped the library flourish. The library board, staff and patrons continue to work to provide the best quality of library service possible for the money for the benefit of the library's public.